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DONOR FIGURES ON 9TH TO 12TH CENTURY SCULPTURE IN EASTERN INDIA: A PROGRESS REPORT

Rob Linrothe

Introduction

Since mid-September 2016 to the time of writing (March 2017) I have been in India on an American Institute of Indian Studies-affiliated research project.[1] During most of that period, I was working in West Bengal and Bihar to document the donor figures, or as I prefer to call them, sponsor figures,[2] on as many Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina sculptures as possible. Although a number of scholars have worked on these relatively minor figures,[3] the sponsor figures have not had the kind of sustained and comprehensive attention that, for example, donor inscriptions have received since the nineteenth century. Obviously, the inscriptions provide invaluable evidence, though surprisingly few of the image inscriptions have been systematically translated by specialists—the catalogs of the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal, the Berlin Museum for Indian Art, the Varendra Research Society, and by Enamul Haque and The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art being precious exceptions. Nevertheless, a widespread logocentrism in academic studies has, in my opinion, largely blinded us to the kind of supplementary data that sponsor figures can provide, independent of, or in most cases, in the absence of donor inscriptions. As the principal criterion for my study, I am thus using neither inscriptions nor aesthetic beauty, nor for that matter iconographic rarity, quality, or even condition or intactness, but only one factor: are sponsor figures present? Ironically, for this purpose, neglected pedestals in dusty storage rooms are nearly as useful to me as whole sculptures in worship in village shrines.

Since at this time I am only a few months into my project, I still have as many questions as answers, but my aim is to bring as many of these figures as possible into a kind of literal and figurative database, and then analyze them on the basis of various criteria for possible patterns or tendencies. I would like to be able to answer questions such as: do they change in size, placement or number over time or in different regions? Are there visible differences in the treatment of the sponsor figures on Brahmanical versus Buddhist or Jaina sculptures? Can they provide insight and evidence of the ways and extent to which women were patrons or sponsors of such sculptures? Are women more or less likely to sponsor the production of female deity *mūrtis*, or male and female deities equally? Do they tend to produce fewer but more expensive sculptures? Is there an implied gendered spatial hierarchy in Buddhist or in Brahmanical themes—that is, if a male is the principal sponsor, is he more likely to be placed on the left or the right? If a female is the sponsor, is she more likely to be placed on the left or the right; and if a couple is depicted as sponsor, is there a consistent pattern for its placement? I hope it is obvious that at this stage in my research project, it is premature for me to attempt to definitely answer such questions. I will, however, attempt to

present some preliminary findings for one of the most frequently encountered themes of Brahmanical sculptures in West Bengal and Bihar, Viṣṇu.

Before proceeding there, however, I would like to first provide a overview of what I have done so far in these last months, since I arrived in West Bengal and started working for two months there, and then shifting to Bihar through January 2017. Mainly I have been documenting sculptures in some sixteen different museums, thanks to many of the directors and curators who have opened their galleries and, in a few cases, storerooms. For my study, I am only using objects that I have examined personally and photographed, the details of the sponsor figures being crucial for such a study. So far at the sixteen museums I have been able to document 325 relevant sculptures—that is, with sponsor figures. [4] In Bihar, I was also able to take advantage of the collaboration and suggestions of a few learned and helpful local people who have made it possible to efficiently go to some of the many villages that preserve older sculptures in their local *devi-asthāna*.[5] Those and a few other archaeological or living religious sites such as the Mahābodhi Temple and the Mahanta Maṭha in Bodhgaya have led to documenting an additional 81 sculptures with sponsor figures, for a current working total of 406.[6] Of course, this is merely a drop in the ocean of surviving sculptures in eastern India, not to speak of those in Europe and America, or of the very rich holdings in Dhaka and Rajshahi in Bangladesh where I hope in good time I will be able to extend this study.

The 406 sculptures with sponsor figures documented so far represent a broad spectrum of Brahmanical themes, as can be seen from **Table 6.1**. The same is true for the Buddhist material as well, listed in **Table 6.2**. When I arrived, I had hoped to include many more Jaina sculptures with sponsor figures than I have actually been able to incorporate, all Jaina Tīrthaṅkara.[7] This is due to at least two factors. First, there are many fewer Jaina sculptures to be found in the museums than Brahmanical and Buddhist. Second is the unfortunate fact that the ones that are available are often done in a coarser, more friable stone that does not allow for fine details such as the distinction between male and female sponsors. To be sure, there are notable exceptions of fine stone and metal Jaina sculptures, and on the other hand, there are a number of Brahmanical and Buddhist sculptures where the sex of the sponsors cannot be deciphered visually.

Preliminary Analysis of Viṣṇu Sculptures in Bihar and Bengal

Here is a rough analysis of the sponsor figures for a significant portion of the 406 documented ones. Approximately 20 percent of the total is constituted by one particular theme, that of Viṣṇu, who is also probably the most commonly depicted sculptural subject matter across Bihar and Bengal during the relevant period.[8] So far, I have documented 77 standing Viṣṇu figures in Bihar and West Bengal, mainly of the four-armed *samapada* variety, but including a few other standing variants, but not including Varāha or Narasiṃha. At this preliminary stage I am heuristically ignoring significant but relatively subtle iconographic distinctions such as which hand the *cakra* or the *gada* is in. It is the sponsor figures, not the 77 Viṣṇus that are temporarily the most significant here, and they can be grouped within 5 categories: solitary male, solitary female, couples, families, and of indecipherable sex.

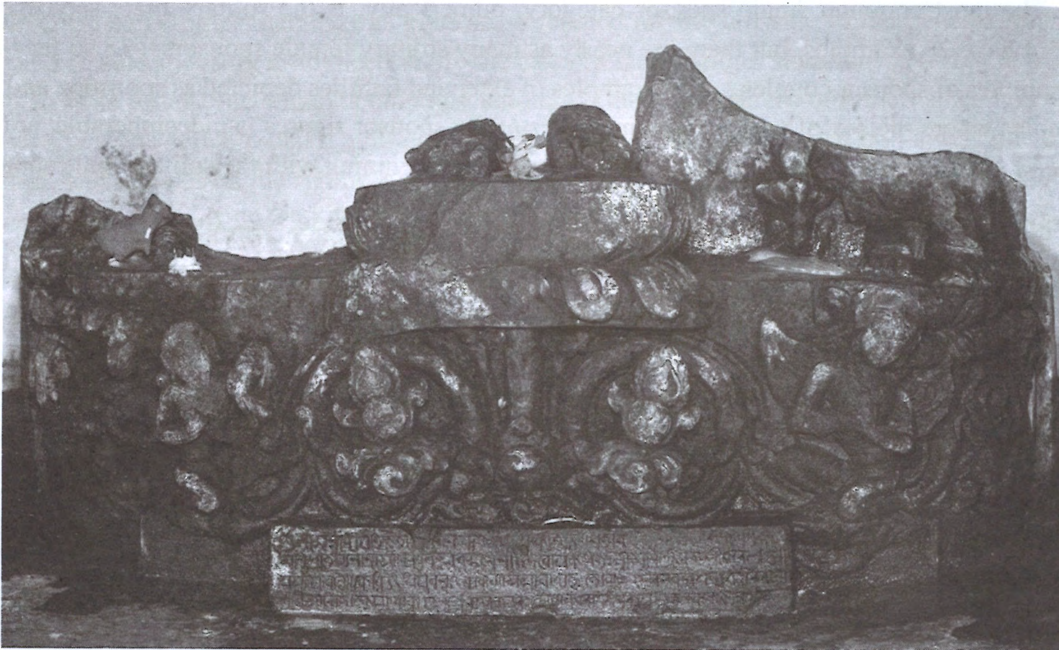


Plate 6.1: Pedestal-fragment of a Viṣṇu sculpture, ca. 12th c., 28 x 49 cm; Kamaladityasthan, Andhra Thari village, Simarahgarh, Madhubani District, Bihar [Photo R. Linrothe, January 2017].



Plate 6.2: Detail of Plate 6.1 depicting Śrī Dharadāsa, minister of Nayandeva- identified by inscription- and (presumably) his wife [Photo R. Linrothe, January 2017].

The most common single sponsor category, numerically, is the solitary male sponsor, for which I have 26 examples, but there are nearly as many solitary female sponsors—18 so far—and 22 examples of sponsor couples,[9] nine examples of extended families depicted as sponsors, and two examples where the sex of one or more members of the sponsor figures is indecipherable, at least to me. Let us examine these categories in greater detail, beginning with the solitary male sponsor.

Solitary male sponsors: 26 total, 13 Bengal, 13 Bihar; Left side[10]: 22 (opp. Garuḍa; 2 w no Garuḍa; 3 with Garuḍa at center); Sponsor holds garland: 4, Metal: 1; Right side: 4 (opp. Garuḍa left).

Solitary female sponsors: 18 total; 8 Bengal, 8 Bihar, 2 Bihar or Bengal; Left side: 15 (Garuḍa on right: 1 with no Garuḍa); Holding garland: 3; Metal: 1; Right side: 3 (Garuḍa on left); Holding garland: 1.

Sponsor couples: 22 total; 13 Bengal, 9 Bihar; Joint sponsor couples: 19; Left side, male closest to center, Garuḍa on right or at center: 19 (1 metal); Male holds garland: 7; Female holds garland: 0; Right side, male closest to center: 0.

Split donor couples: 3; Male on left, female on right: 3; Male holds flower offering: 1; Male on right, female on left: 0.

Extended families as sponsors: 9 total; 4 Bengal, 5 Bihar; Families represented by all male or all female members: 3; Families represented by mixed-sex members: 6; Examples include 3, 4, and 6-members represented on one or both sides of the pedestal.

Sponsors of indecipherable sex: 2 (Bengal); Split couple, male on left, female (?) at right, Garuḍa at center: 1; Solitary sponsor (male?) on right, metal: 1.

Summary

As stated and as can be seen in **Table 6.3**, the single largest category of sponsors of Viṣṇu sculptures is solitary males. However, if one considers that in extended family depictions, there are often more women than men, we have the situation where of 119 sponsors depicted on 77 Viṣṇu sculptures, at least 54 are women, slightly over 45%, which helps to undermine any sense that women were less than fully engaged in the patronage of religious sculpture.

One condition affecting the spatial placement of the sponsors on the pedestal in Viṣṇu sculptures, something that does not pertain to other themes, is the iconographic requirement to accommodate Garuḍa, usually on the pedestal. He is most often placed on the far right, and second at center, only rarely on the left of the pedestal. Thus 22 of the 26 solitary male sponsors are placed on the left, opposite Garuḍa. Similarly, a substantial majority of solitary female sponsors are placed on the left, and 100% of the joint sponsor couples were placed on the left, none on the right. Extended families were sometimes distributed to both the left and right sides, but a larger number were placed on the left. Thus there is no exclusive gendering of the left or right side of the pedestal, but there is a strong preference for the left side of the pedestal as the prime location for all sponsors.

This is, of course, on the proper right side of standing Viṣṇu, which has a favorable resonance. However, in some other themes, this kind of preference for the left side of the pedestal for both male and female sponsors is not necessarily the case. In fact, in other situations, a different pattern seems to be in effect, one which is only nascent here. That other pattern or rather, since it is never absolute, perhaps better to call it a discernible tendency, is that males appear on the left side of the pedestal, and females on the right.

This pattern is almost invariable for the sponsor figures on the 20 Umā-Maheśvara sculptures I have gathered. The women sponsors are almost always placed on Umā's side and the males on Maheśvara's. Whether they are part of split sponsor couples or are male or female solitary sponsors, they appear on the side of pedestal closest to the god or the goddess to which their sex corresponds. In the split sponsor couples appearing on the Viṣṇu sculptures I examined, that is also the distribution in each case, male on the left, female on the right, but the sample is too small to make broad conclusions. Nevertheless, with regard to sponsor placement, each theme needs to be looked at in relationship both to larger tendencies and the requirements of the theme's own iconographic necessities. There are formulas, repetition, and unstated expectations at work here, just as there are formulaic, stock phrases in the donor inscriptions. The ones in the inscriptions are verbal, the ones on the figures are visual, and neither should be neglected merely because there is stylization, stereotyping and verbal or visual clichés.

The rewards of putting inscriptions and figures together have greater potential than the study of one to the neglect of the other. I conclude with one example of such rewards (**Plates 6.1 & 6.2**). The inscription on a Viṣṇu sculpture pedestal in Andhra Tharhi of Madhubani district of Bihar has been repeatedly published, among other places, in Radhakrishna Choudhary's *Select Inscriptions of Bihar* (1958: 124), in Bhagwant Sahai's *The Inscriptions of Bihar* (1983: 133–134) and it was discussed extensively by K. P. Jayaswal in his "Contributions to the History of Mīthila" (*JBRS* 9 [1923]: 300–310). It was composed at the behest of the named sponsor of the Viṣṇu sculpture, a figure of some historical importance, a certain Śrī Dharadāsa or Dhanadasa, who identified himself as the minister of Nānya Deva, the late 11–early 12th century ruler of the Karnata dynasty of Mithila. According to Sahai, Śrī Dharadāsa also served at the court of the late 12th century Sena ruler, Lakṣmaṇasena, which is just barely possible if implausible. At any rate, the inscription has been mined by the illustrious scholars mentioned for its considerable historical value. Because they concentrated only on the inscriptions, however, none of these scholars identified the sponsor figure immediately adjacent to the donors inscriptions as Śrī Dharadāsa and his wife. It is a double portrait, not in the vulgar sense of an accurate portrayal of the facial characteristics, but in the sense of idealized effigies that effectively represent known living figures. In that regard, then, this small portion of the sculpture depicting its own sponsors, although unfortunately apparently intentionally defaced, includes an authenticated portrait of a historically known personage of high rank, a rarity among the hundreds of sponsors of Pāla-Sena period sculpture whose names may be long forgotten but whose forms are still there for us to see if only we look.

Table 6.1:
Brahmanical Themes with Sponsor Figures Among the 406 Documented To Date (1 February 2017)

Viṣṇu	Gaṇeśa	Gajalakśmī
2- or 4-armed	Kārttikēya	Sarasvatī
Anantaśeṣa	Kāmadeva	Gaṅgā
Narasiṃha	Śani	Yamunā
Sahasra Viṣṇu	Umā-Maheśvara	Vārāhī
Vārāha	Marriage of Śiva	Manasā
Garuḍa	Harihara	Ambikā
Sūrya	Kāmadeva and Ratī	Cāmuṇḍā
Brahmā	Devī	Guru, Śivācārya
Agni	Mahiṣāsuramardini	
Revanta	Durgā	
Śiva	Gaurī	
Aghora Śiva	with Sadyojāta Śiva	
Bhairava	Pārvatī	
Gajāsurāntaka	Lālitā	
Natarāja	Siṃhavāhinī	
Sadāśiva		
Śiva-Lokeśvara		

Table 6.2:
Buddhist Themes with Sponsor Figures Among the 406 Documented To Date (1 February 2017)

Buddha	2-armed	Tārā
Regular	6-armed	Vajratārā
Crowned	Ṣaḍakṣarī	Prajñāpāramitā
Vajrasattva	Siṁhanāda	Cuṇḍa
Heruka	12-armed	Aparajitā
Samvara	Maitreya	Mārīcī
Avalokiteśvara	Mañjuśrī	Uṣṇīṣavijayā
2-armed	Kumārabhūta	Vasudhārā
Padmapāṇi	Mañjuvajra	Jambhala
4-armed	Siddhaikavira	Vajrācārya
Avalokiteśvara	Vāgīśvara	
Pretasaṁtarpita		

Table 6.3:

Compiled data-analysis of 77 examples of Viṣṇu sculptures' sponsor figures

Solitary male sponsors: 26 total, 13 Bengal, 13 Bihar, 85% on the Left

Solitary female sponsors: 18 total; 8 Bengal, 8 Bihar, 2 Bihar or Bengal, 83% on the Left, 17% on Right

Sponsor couples: 22 total; 13 Bengal, 9 Bihar, 86% are Joint couples, 100% of these on the Left, 14% Split couples, 100% of these are male on the Left, female on the Right

Extended families as sponsors: 9 total; 4 Bengal, 5 Bihar, No consistent patterns, family sizes vary, placement varies

Sponsors of indecipherable sex: 2 (Bengal)

Appendix 6.1:
Eastern Indian sculptures ca. 8th–13th c. with sponsor figures documented at the following museums in West Bengal and Bihar since 1 October 2016:
Asutosh Museum: 39
Bangiya Sahitya Parishad: 23
Bodh Gaya ASI Site Museum: 12
Cooch Behar ASI Museum: 19
Darbhanga Chandradhary Museum: 10
Gaya Museum: 10
Indian Museum, Kolkata: 51
Malda Museum: 30
Nalanda ASI Museum: 16
Narada Museum Nawada: 11
Patna Museum: 59
State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal: 30
Tamluk ASI Museum: 1
Vaiśālī ASI Museum: 2
Vikramaśilā ASI Museum: 12
Subtotal: 325.

Appendix 6.2:
Sculptures with sponsor figures documented in villages or sites in Bihar since 1 December 2016:
Begusarai Region: 6
Bodh Gaya Mahābodhi Temple grounds: 11
Bodh Gaya Mahanta Maṭha: 6
Darbhanga Region: 9
Gaya Region: 7
Madhubani Region: 16
Nalanda Region: 23
Rajgir Region: 3
Subtotal: 81

Notes and References:

1. This essay is adapted from the talk given at the 12th International Congress on Bengal Art 2017 in Kolkata. Besides the organizers from both Bangladesh and India, I would like to think Purnima Mehta and Subir Sarkar of AIIS, and Jayanta Sengupta of the Indian Museum Kolkata with which I am affiliated for this research project.

2. The issue of "the gift" and "donation" within Buddhist studies have begun to be interrogated in anthropology; see Nicolas Sihlé, "Towards a Comparative Anthropology of the Buddhst Gift (and Other Transfers)" *Religion Compass* 9/11 (2015): 352–385. In one sense, the gift or donation is actually a kind of transaction or translation of material resources into spiritual merit or social status. In the case of "donors" of sculptural or painted images, the problem is with the English term "donor" commonly used as an unproblematic translation for the Sanskrit *dānapati*. A "donor" makes a donation, and in English the term's connotations are a person of wealth handing "downward" something to an inferior in need—to an NGO, or to an impoverished person. Assuming that the images the "donors" made were "donated" to temples or monasteries, the ultimate recipient and juridical "owner" of the institution is the deity or god him- or herself. One does not "donate" to god! The Sanskrit term *dānapati* as I understand it does not have these connotations, and might better be translated at "offerer" who "offers" upward, as it were. I prefer "sponsor" since it places emphasis not on the spiritual merit or the intentions of the offerer—which are historically unknowable except in the abstract or prescribed ideal—but on the actual act of sponsoring the creation of a tangible sculpture.

3. Several works of Claudine Bautze Picron and Jinah Kim in particular are notable in this regard.

4. See Appendix 6.1.

5. See list in Appendix 6.2.

6. I am not including here the work done in February and March 2017 in Orissa, where another 178 sculptures with sponsor figures were documented, 97 of which were in seven museum visited.

7. They include the following: Chandraprabha, Neminātha, Ṛṣabhanātha, and Śāntinātha.

8. A. K. Sinha may not grossly overstate the case when he notes that "more than half of the Indian niceties in art, architecture, religio-mythical or purely classical literature deal with the popular theme of [Viṣṇu] and his various incarnation;" Ajoy Kumar Sinha, "An Iconographical Study of Viṣṇu Images in the Bhagalpur Museum," *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* 59–68 (1981–82): 59–68. In my study to date (February 2017), crowned and uncrowned Buddhas constitute 13% of the total (55), various forms of Avalokiteśvara 11.5% (47), and Tārā 8% (32 examples). Thus these three subject form 32.5% of the total so far; and with Viṣṇu, account for 50%.

9. Couples are often mentioned in various types of inscrptions as acting together, including copper plates such as the one recently published of a donation of uncertain numbers of land plots by Dharmapāla to the Buddhist *saṃghas* of three facilities established by *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga and his wife in the village of Antarāvanikā and at Somapura-mahāvihāra;" Furui Ryosuke, "Indian Museum Copper Plate Inscription of Dharmapala, Year 26: Tentative Reading and Study" *South Asian Studies* 27 no. 2 (2011): 146.

10. NB: In describing the figures on the pedestal, "left" and "right" refer to the viewer's left and right; when referring to the deities, "left" and "right" refer to the deities' proper left and right.